

Committee on Accountability

Charge: Develop recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the state accountability system.

“I am all for accountability, but I believe we are testing our children too much. Tests are only tools. They shouldn’t dominate the lives of students, parents, and teachers.”

–Jim Rex

During his campaign for State Superintendent, Dr. Rex affirmed his commitment to accountability and to maintaining the rigor of South Carolina’s academic standards, considered among the strongest in the nation. However, he also called for revisions to the state’s 1998 Accountability Act to reduce the excessive testing required under the law and to make state tests more useful to teachers in guiding and improving instruction.

The Committee on Accountability agreed that the law should be revised. “As with any program initiative, the system must be periodically reviewed and updated to reflect the changes in testing, testing procedures, and availability of testing instruments that better meet the intent of the law and the relationship between the state accountability system and federal legislation,” the Committee wrote.

The Committee issued recommendations addressing five individual components of the accountability system: standards, assessment, professional development and technical assistance, reporting, and rewards and interventions.

The Committee felt strongly that South Carolina should preserve the rigor of its academic standards, but address several issues that make them difficult for teachers and administrators to use. Specifically, the committee agreed that South Carolina should revise its standards to increase focus, set priorities, and reduce intersections, overlaps, omissions and redundancies across content areas.

Addressing assessment, the Committee recommended reducing state testing to the minimum necessary to track progress and draw comparisons. Its members also felt strongly that South Carolina should revise state assessments to provide quick results and better diagnostic information for teachers in gauging student progress and improving instruction.

The Committee expressed a number of concerns about state report cards, questioning the accuracy of the data and the usefulness of the information included. It concluded, however, that most problems with the report card would be resolved by revisions to state assessments.

Although it focused primarily on improving specific elements of South Carolina’s accountability system, the Committee also expressed the concern that flaws in the system overall may contribute unfairly to a negative perception of public schools, especially among the

vast majority of citizens who lack first-hand information. Specifically, the group noted that under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, South Carolina's schools falsely appear to fall short because our standards are much more rigorous than those set by other states. In any case, the group added, all schools, here and around the nation, will eventually be identified as "failing" under NCLB because of the law's flawed premise that 100 percent of students will score proficient on state assessments. The Committee's first recommendation addresses this concern, emphasizing the need for South Carolina to communicate more effectively about accountability and our state's progress.

Recommendations

Overall

1. South Carolina should support increased parent and general public awareness about and involvement in public schools. Schools should be inviting and open to all members of the community.

Standards

2. South Carolina should focus and benchmark academic standards within and across content areas so that every teacher can identify and address those standards most critical for student success at each grade level.

Assessment

3. South Carolina should immediately implement the recommendations developed by the Education Oversight Committee's Testing Task Force to reduce the testing burden and give timely, useful data to teachers. Those recommendations call for the SDE to:
 - a) Provide a formative assessment system that allows educators to monitor student progress during the school year;
 - b) Computerize assessment to allow rapid reporting;
 - c) Develop and release better information about state standards and assessments, including sample test items and released test forms;
 - d) Provide assistance in developing classroom assessments aligned with state assessments;
 - e) Assign teams of curriculum and testing experts to thoroughly analyze test results each year, including item-by-item performance;
 - f) Reduce the amount of testing required overall;
 - g) Establish a differentiated assessment plan to provide better information on certain subjects at particular grades. Most importantly, the grade three assessment should be re-envisioned as primarily a reading test, since reading is the most important outcome of the primary grades and is critical to success in all other subjects;
 - h) Vertically equate reading and math tests to allow for meaningful measure of growth;

- i) Equate Algebra I and English I end-of-course assessments to grade-level Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT) assessments, so that middle school students are not required to take both tests;
- j) Improve the construction of the test at cut scores (Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced), and change the cut scores to reflect changes in the test.

Professional Development

- 4. South Carolina should develop and ensure statewide implementation of a focused professional development program centered on the critical objectives of the state accountability system. The program should be guided by the following goals:
 - a) Teacher preparation within higher education should be grounded in current practice and related more directly to classroom expectations.
 - b) Teacher recruitment and professional development at the district level should be designed with student needs more in mind.
 - c) Professional development programs for school principals should be redesigned to emphasize management and personnel development skills.
 - d) Current funding for professional development should be redirected to create demonstration sites for effective practice, allowing effective practices to be transferred to schools and districts statewide.

Rewards and Incentives

- 5. The SDE should explore approaches to provide more effective and efficient technical assistance to underperforming schools and districts.

Other Issues

6. South Carolina should focus resources on ensuring that by third grade, students have the reading skills to succeed at subsequent grade levels.
7. South Carolina should support expansion of early childhood education and parenting programs that ensure students enter school prepared for learning and that provide appropriate accountability for all stakeholders.
8. The SDE should be organized and operated in a way that emphasizes its role as a service provider to educators.